

Saigon, Vietnam

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Ky's Candidacy and U.S. Stakes in the Coming Elections

BY: Daniel Ellsberg

Preface

A case can be made that it is desirable for Nguyen Cao Ky to become President of Vietnam, and an even stronger case can be made that it is becoming inevitable. And the risks involved in supporting any alternative -- risks in terms of stability, of ARVN unity, acceptance of the regime and pursuit of the war, of administrative competence -- have been spelled out clearly in Mission analyses. Yet there are costs, as well, to Ky's victory, perhaps even to his candidacy: major costs and risks that have, it seems to me, been seriously understated in the official internal discussions I have seen. And most of these costs and risks apply nearly as strongly to any military candidate. e.g., Thieu.

If much of what follows seems negative and critical, it is not because I see only dangers ahead and a choice between failures. On the contrary, the greatest danger I see is one of lost opportunity: neglect of a real chance, unforeseeable more than one year ago, of open politics that may bring into power more representative, respected, nationalistic leadership at the top level of the GVN, with the aim and perhaps capability of transforming the GVN and RVNAF and their relations with the people.

The political calm of the last six months has reflects in large part the freedom and honesty of last September's elections -- Ky's most promising and creditable achievement in office -- and the subsequent maturity of the Constituent Assembly's workings; these raised hopes of a constitutional process by which government by military and by Northerners could be replaced. That calm might not survive the disappointment of those hopes; i.e., the victory of Ky. What is more likely however, is that a calm would continue, but in a form ever more deadly: the calm of apathy, of non-involvement, attentisme, among the non-Communist Vietnamese.

That path -- the one that appears to await us if we should find no choice but to stand by passively or to support Ky's ambitions -- is just not good enough for us to accept without searching for alternatives. To motivate that search, even at this late date, is the aim of this paper. Hence its "negativism": what may seem its obsessive dwelling upon unpleasant realities that appear to me to attend our recent course. (This memo was framed and begun two months ago -- before hepatitis intervened -- when the clear feeling at the highest Mission levels was that the current course was not only best but hopeful and adequate to our purposes: no further search was called for).

In brief, I do not think that a Vietnamese Government of the present character and relations with its public can win this war; nor (what is more to the point) can the US, by itself or in support of such a Government, even make significant progress in the guerrilla/political conflict in the countryside. Thus the stakes in favor of change.

There is particular emphasis throughout this paper on matters of "image" in Vietnamese eyes: alleged beliefs, guesses, attitudes and prejudices, including inferences and suspicions (concerning, in particular, our own aims, influence, tactics) that may seem to Americans to be fanciful, unwarranted, even paranoid. The truth is that what Vietnamese believe is part of the reality in which we are. It is, regrettably, a region of reality that many Americans seem to find unfamiliar, or choose to regard as insubstantial.

I have no special access to or resources for exploring Vietnamese opinion. Much of what follows, then, has only the limited authority of my own conviction -- based upon talks, over the past year and a half, with Vietnamese (both Saigon-based and provincial, civil and military) and Americans having broad experience with Vietnamese -- that the views reported are held by a wide range of the politically-conscious Vietnamese.

and Thieu in Vietnamese Eyes

At least till recently, it has been very widely believed among Vietnamese that prevailing US Mission preferences -- despite a formal, public stance of neutrality -- favored the victory of a military candidate in the coming elections, and in particular, favored Ky.

However, there has been a growing discrepancy, over the past two years, between the increasingly favorable attitudes toward Ky of many US officials, even when such approval was at its most measured, restrained, conditional, and the attitudes I have heard any Vietnamese express in that period. It seems difficult to find a Vietnamese who will express any strong respect for Ky. Those (mostly young) who do mention some strong points, such as flexibility and encouragement of youthful officials, still do not claim that he has the respect, confidence, or support of any significant civil group in Vietnamese society. Nor will they deny his overriding shortcomings as either a representative or an inspirational national leader in the eyes of most Vietnamese.

The impression in US journals and official traffic that Ky has "grown in office" and has greatly increased in stature and respect among Vietnamese in the last two years is, I believe, an American notion, reflecting American attitudes. What has increased, especially since the Struggle Movement in 1966, is Vietnamese appreciation of Ky's power -- based in particular, as they see it, upon US support as well as upon the army and police, and control of funds and administration -- and of his will and tactical ability to use it to stay in office. This appreciation is such that probably most Vietnamese expect that Ky will become their next President despite all his impressive handicaps in winning the hearts and minds of Vietnamese voters.

But in other respects, I believe that the dominant Vietnamese perceptions of Ky's most salient personal qualities have not changed notably from the time he first took office: over-young, immature, lacking in strong nationalistic instincts, a "playboy", narrowly educated, undignified, impulsive in action and speech, only sporadically "serious", flamboyant, promiscuous. It is, at most, in American eyes, not Vietnamese, that he has overcome his "cowboy" image: one that is incomparably more damaging politically in Vietnamese culture, with its Confucian emphasis on age, dignity, maturity, education, and virtuous example, than it would be in US politics of the Sixties.

Some of these traits could change eventually in the public mind, as Ky grows older, with different publicity and different personal behavior. Far more important, however, are factors of past background, behavior, and associations that Ky cannot change. He is, above all, a Northerner, in a country that is fed up with being run by Northerners. He is a military man, in a culture that accords little respect to the role.

education, or outlook of military men, and specifically distrusts their competence or good-will as governors. In a country of xenophobes and nationalists, he is a former French officer lacking any record of patriotic opposition to the French, and is widely believed to owe his attainment and continuation of office to American intervention and support.

- It may be hard to find a Magsaysay, or a Ho Chi Minh, on the current Vietnamese scene, but it is almost harder to find a candidate with a list as long as Ky's of major political liabilities. In fact, it is a challenging exercise to imagine just how one would change or add to this set of properties to invent a less acceptable, more alien figure for the role of popular, representative, symbolic, inspiring national leader in South Vietnam.

One could be also Montagnard, or Catholic, cowardly or notoriously corrupt; all these would hurt badly. On the other hand, Ky could easily be less intelligent or competent, less flexible or energetic than he is, yet without being markedly more unacceptable. These latter dimensions -- highly valued, in Vietnamese leaders, by Americans, along with facility in English -- are simply not very politically relevant in Vietnam, especially for the symbolically important role of Head of State. Certainly they are less salient to Vietnamese than to American officials, who, on the other hand, find in themselves no strong prejudices against a young...no chern...general...who looks and acts like Ky...as symbolic leader of South Vietnam.

As for Thieu, Ky's chief military rival for the candidacy, his disadvantages are in many respects similar, if marginally less than those of Ky. As he himself describes them to associates, he is from the Center, even if not from the North; and he is a Catholic. He is more dignified, more mature, more experienced and prudent than Ky; yet for other reasons, these qualities do not suffice to assure him more public confidence. Where Ky fails to gain the instinctive trust and confidence of the Vietnamese because he is so "different" in Vietnamese cultural terms, so young and impulsive, Thieu fails of their trust because he is simply regarded as untrustworthy: [conspiratorial, ely, "too clever"], an impression strengthened by his roles in the downfall of Duong Van Minh, General Khanh, and Phan Huy Quat, and not weakened since.

Above all, as he himself admits, Thieu shares with Ky the political burden of being a military man; as he is reported to have remarked some weeks ago, "The Vietnamese people are weary of military rule".

("Give us anything, young, old, I don't care, Central, Southern, Northern: just as long as he's not military," says a young Constituent Assembly member, more bluntly).

Why this is so I discuss below. It includes as one element a belief that the military are peculiarly susceptible to a role as foreign puppets; but this liability, along with others, of any military regime is strongly exacerbated in a GVN dominated by the present personalities, Ky in particular.

As a Vietnamese officer describes the attitudes of many of his Central Vietnamese associates:

"You could have a government that was, in actual fact, far more subservient to US interests than the Ky government has ever been -- it could really be a puppet and the people could really know it -- and, at the same time, it could be far more acceptable to the Vietnamese people."

The nominal governors, he pointed out, could be civilian, they could be Southern, they could have a nationalist reputation, they could be dignified and "Vietnamese"; for Americans to tolerate or prefer such qualities in Vietnamese symbolic leadership would show, reassuringly, American sensitivity and respect for Vietnamese cultural attitudes and sentiments.

A well-known journalist, managing editor of an English daily, says almost the same words; and goes on to say, with great feeling, that for America, on the contrary, to favor or support a Ky as symbolic Chief of State is seen by him and by a wide range of Vietnamese as an insult, a humiliating gesture of contempt.

His is not the only voice, nor the least friendly to Americans, that has expressed that pain and resentment to me. It bespeaks regret, almost despair, at what seems American insensitivity or casual disregard of Vietnamese values with respect to national leadership. And it carries, of course, an ominous ring of an anti-American protest of the future.

But what does all this matter, if the power of office, Army and police backing, and the widespread presumption of US support, combine to assure a military candidate an electoral victory if he runs?

It means that it is quite unlikely that Ky or Thieu, or any military candidate (excepting Duong Van Minh) could win an electoral contest in Vietnam that was truly as free, open and uncoerced as the September 1966 elections for the Constituent Assembly: certainly without, and perhaps even with, the "legitimate" use of government resources in the campaign.

It means, therefore, that such a victory would be almost universally interpreted (rightly or wrongly) as a result of CVN manipulation, with US approval and support.

It means that Ky or Thieu as Head of State, would not fulfill the need for respected, publicly supported, representative, nationalistic leadership.

The question remains: Is there, after all, an urgent need for such leadership, at this point in the struggle against the Communists; with the military challenge of the North Vietnamese and main force units as large as it is; with the American role as important as it is; with the need for stability and for administrative competence as urgent as it is? This comes close to asking: Does the Vietnamese effort still count? Does Vietnamese allegiance, dedication commitment, still matter?

I believe, with many Vietnamese, that the need for such leadership -- that can make strong claims upon the patriotism, the nationalistic sentiments and pride of the Vietnamese citizens -- has grown increasingly urgent in the face of the Communist challenge ever since the early years of Diem, and never more so than today. Lacking such leadership, a government will fail to exist that could survive a US departure, let alone a renewed Communist challenge after our departure. But even in the shorter run, I believe the lack of such leadership will block significant progress in the political/military competition with the Communists; and that it even poses a serious risk of domestic revolt, exploitable by the Communists.

The Possibility of Central/Southern Urban Revolt

To start with the latter contingency, the most ominous, though not the most probable: some serious Vietnamese observers believe there is a significant possibility of a renewal of turbulent public demonstrations and revolt in Central Vietnam, if Ky should become president and quite possibly before that if it should appear highly likely that Ky will

become the next president. The core of this protest would probably be the Struggle Movement organization, but active participation might be much wider than before and passive sympathy could be very broad indeed. Moreover, unlike the last outbreak, this time there might be strong active participation by Southern elements in alliance, tacit or formal, with the Central Buddhists. The basis for this alliance would be:

a. A common sense of past "betrayal" by the Ky government and the US, and

b. A sense of desperation at being excluded for years to come from participation and power in the GVN (especially bitter to the Southerners, who might well feel that in a truly free election -- of the sort the US was publicly pledged to support -- the presidency would almost surely have gone to a Southerner).

There is considerable agreement that there will be common bonds of resentment among those disparate elements and that there will be at least stirrings of revolt given an actual or imminent victory by Ky. Whether the revolt could achieve the proportions of last year's Struggle, or go beyond, is more open to argument. Some Vietnamese, whose opinions I respect, along with many members of the US Mission, have assured me that the Struggle Organization is dispersed and impotent and could not summon broad support, at least for several years. But there are others (including members of the Constituent Assembly) who maintain that this is untrue, and that the very assurance of a Ky victory would touch off an explosion in the Center, joined by a less organized brushfire in the South. I do not think this latter opinion should be dismissed casually. I have noted that among Americans, the belief that Tri Quang's apparatus has been thoroughly neutralized (a matter on which I have no basis for judgment) is often associated with what seems to me a distinct under-estimation of public distaste for the Ky regime and for military rule in general, and of resentment of past US support to it; these feelings are not limited to Central Vietnamese Buddhists, nor were they during last year's Struggle, when the Buddhist militants expressed the sentiments of many Vietnamese who did not approve of their methods.

A particularly ominous feature of any new Struggle, if one should break out, would be the virtual certainty that it would have a violent, explicit anti-American theme: not only because this would serve the purposes of the Strugglers, but because it would reflect the emotional attitudes of the Buddhists and Southern leaders, and because the US

would be interpreted, quite plausibly, as the source of critical support for the continuance of Northern military rule. However the conflict turned out in the short run, the consequences of this public expression of hostility to the US would be irrevocable. (Even without a sharp outbreak, a Ky victory is likely to feed a slow welling of anti-US resentment that could someday erupt uncontrollably). As for the ability of Ky and Loan to prevent or contain such an uprising, one Central Vietnamese member of the Constituent Assembly (who predicts a violent reaction to a Ky victory) points out: "Diem failed to do it; and he had much greater police power and control of the Army and administration than a Ky regime is ever likely to have".

Even if the VC were not in a position to exploit such turbulence militarily, the psychological and political impact of these demonstrations, both internationally and within Vietnam, would be priceless to the Communists. But at this moment, it would appear that the VC are in a position in Central Vietnam to coordinate a wave of guerrilla terrorism and even major military operations with any disturbances that might emerge in the cities. Militarily, this could present the US with a choice between major troop reinforcement in the Center or the acceptance of major setbacks and retrenchment. Yet the simultaneous occurrence of political chaos, constituting a strong public challenge to the legitimacy of the GVN and to the role of US support, would make the issue of sizable US reinforcement maximally painful and divisive within the US, perhaps even politically infeasible.

In short, the gravest possible issues are involved here. We have been telling ourselves that we have reached a plateau from which sudden deterioration in the short run is highly unlikely; it is precisely this reduction, compared to one year or two years ago, in the probability of short-run disaster that is the major basis for our feelings of accomplishment during the last 18 months. Yet the contingency above throws that assurance into question. If the prospect of continued rule by military and by Northerners is as unpopular as I believe it is, and if desperate, resentful, factional leadership -- and the VC -- ignite that tinder, the results within the next six months could make a bitter mockery of recent US expectations of a long and ultimately productive engagement in Vietnam.

The Likelihood of Apathy

Let us now suppose, as is more likely, that the violent contingency above simply does not happen, despite a Ky or Thieu victory; i.e., that Tri Quang is currently impotent, the Southerners are somehow bought off or propitiated, and the VC are disappointed in hopes of political rioting with which to coordinate military/terroristic attacks. What problems would remain?

First, even if the prevention or containment of incipient revolt is assured, it is hard to believe that this will be so without the investment of a great deal of police and administrative attention to the effort. Just as the Struggle Movement turned the attention of the Police Special Branch and the Police Field Forces almost entirely toward intelligence and operations concerning political factions other than the VC, so the long-term coercive effort to maintain in office a regime that lacked real popular support would divert major resources away from the struggle against the Communists. A government so absorbed would have that much less attention and energy to devote to the problems of pacification.

Another problem, one on which I shall not dwell, is the effect on US domestic and international opinion and support for our efforts here of what would appear to be a manipulated election, producing "more of the same". Serious as these effects would probably be, they get enough attention in Washington and need no underlining by me; in my opinion, the effects within South Vietnam, though less discussed, are more significant.

To assess the more diffuse, longer-run effects of preserving a GVN with the present character, one must ask, "What do we want of the Vietnamese and of their Government?" and "How does the nature of their Government and its relations with the US affect their behavior?" On these questions, Vietnamese perceptions of the GVN as

- a. neither representative nor respectable, and as
- b. a tool of the US, have

have great bearing. For both these perceptions militate against the ability of the GVN either to attract able civilian leadership to its administration or to motivate, inspire, or exact dedicated performance and initiative from its own officials and officers, let alone willing cooperation from the public. Nor do they support efforts to persuade nationalistically-oriented cadre of the NLF to defect to the GVN side.

Virtually all Vietnamese who do not want their country run by Communists recognize that major American presence and involvement is essential to this end, and recognize -- whether they "like" Americans or not -- that involvement on this scale gives the US rights and responsibilities of exercising a large voice in governmental affairs in South Vietnam. Some even go further to find it "natural" -- though regrettable -- that the US should desire and achieve not merely a strong voice, but

virtual control of public administration. (They tend grossly to exaggerate the amount of control actually desired or achieved by the US and the subservience of the current GVN, and frequently misinterpret events along these lines).

A victory by Ky or Thieu, or any other current military leaders, would surely confirm their belief that this thorough control was what the US demanded and what it had acquired. The reasons for this inference seem less evident to many Americans than to Vietnamese. The fact is that, rightly or wrongly, in their relations with Americans, the military are more suspect than any other group of being "puppets", and this for a number of reasons:

- (1) The army, as it exists today, was virtually the creation of foreigners, first the French, then the Americans; trained in foreign military schools, always dependent on foreign support, the Vietnamese officer class is believed to be especially receptive to foreign influence;
- (2) The military advisory system has brought them under the close personal influence of American military officers;
- (3) Above all, the military is known to be totally dependent on the US for its budget, material support and air/mobility combat support (even before the arrival of American combat troops);
- (4) The US is believed -- incorrectly -- to have no inhibitions whatever about using this massive, detailed leverage upon the Vietnamese military to achieve US aims;
- (5) Since US influence enters at every level and agency within the Vietnamese military, any given military ruler is aware (so most Vietnamese believe) that he can be replaced at any moment by another if the Americans should so desire, so that his continued position in office and his policies are subject from moment to moment to American veto; nor will Americans tolerate significant criticism or resistance.

Many Americans and the highest-level Vietnamese military know just how frustratingly far this last impression of total, prompt, military subservience to US wishes -- particularly in terms of carrying out US-desired positive programs -- has departed from reality. But I am concerned here with the prevalence and strength of this belief, as a political fact of life in South Vietnam today. It is widespread enough, I believe, so that virtually any Vietnamese military man, as

If, in fact, we need no more help from the Vietnamese in winning this war than the French asked from 1946 to 1954; if there is no need for Vietnamese enthusiasm, imagination, creativity, leadership, dedication, of the sort that could only come from a sense of full participation and responsibility; if we can, with a little extra effort (and a tolerable number of additional US lives), do the whole job that must be done here, ourselves, with no change in the social system or the relation between government and governed and without massive improvement in the performance of Vietnamese elements; then there is no need to be concerned about the persistence and increase of such "attentism".

I do not believe we can do the job by ourselves; not with five hundred thousand troops, and quite probably, not with a million troops and ten years' effort.

This is true, I would argue, above all because of the persistence and scale of the VC guerrilla threat and the Communist political apparatus. I flatly do not believe the argument that the covert invasion by North Vietnamese regular forces has reduced the political elements of the conflict and the guerrilla challenge, to minor, or even secondary importance, nor that successes of conventional military operations against Main Force/NVA major units will automatically mean the withering away of the guerrillas or the "unraveling" of their apparatus. The "big-unit war", I would say, has not replaced, but has been added to the guerrilla/covert apparatus/political war that preceded it and that is likely to survive it.

That latter political/military war for control of the rural population of Vietnam is not now being won by US/ARVN efforts; nor can it be. It depends too much on intimate knowledge of local populations and practices; on ability to speak the language, to communicate, convince, persuade; and on the assurance in the minds of the local peasants of indefinitely prolonged protection. Even more, it calls for growing trust in and loyalty to a Vietnamese government, for pride in and dedication to government service by Vietnamese soldiers and cadre and officials. American efforts cannot inspire these patriotic commitments.

But neither is this contest being won, nor can it be, nor major progress made, by a GVN with the political characteristics of the present one: a weak government, neither accepted by the population as legitimate nor with a strong sense of its own legitimacy; composed mostly of individuals neither respected by Vietnamese nor representative of the

majority of South Vietnamese; with many of its key positions filled by corrupt or incompetent commanders or officials; with little command discipline or authoritative claim upon its own military units and governmental officials; widely regarded by Vietnamese (rightly or wrongly) as lacking in true nationalism and serving merely as a facade for US control.

This alternative is viable at all only so long as massive US support and presence in Vietnam persists. "So long as 400,000 or more Americans remain in South Vietnam it cannot go Communist," says a Vietnamese political leader, a Northern Catholic; likewise, a Buddhist colonel from Central Vietnam. But, each goes on to say, if the Americans wish neither to stay here in massive strength forever, nor to see a political victory of the Communists soon after their departure -- and even if they wish to see visible progress in the next 18 months or so -- they need the emergence of a strong Vietnamese government, one capable of attracting political support and drawing leadership from the mass of "neutrals" in the population, and thus of defeating the Communist guerrilla forces and/or confronting the NLF effectively in political terms.

Unless and until such a Vietnamese government emerges, Vietnamese will come more and more to sit on the sidelines, letting the Americans bear full responsibility; moreover, the basic hopes and morale of VC cadres will persist, precluding major cadre defection. Under these conditions -- lacking aggressive participation by Vietnamese soldiers, officials or public and without major cracks in the morale of VC subordinate leadership -- the US presence, while preventing Communist victory, will not lead to major progress, even in expanding the area of GVN access and control let alone in winning significant support for the GVN. At least, it will not do the former without great increases in US troops, to the level of a million men or more, committed to a prolonged period of fighting and occupation. Short of that, both VC and GVN officials and soldiers will foresee that a VC political victory is postponed only until the Americans leave. And since few Vietnamese, VC or non-VC, believe the Americans will stay forever, the VC will be encouraged to persist in their struggle and the GVN representatives and the public discouraged from active commitment.

The Military in Vietnamese Eyes

In theory, a GVN with the political strength required need be neither civilian nor democratic in origin. Even a military dictatorship, if it provided strong government, would have some advantages over the present weak, divided government, especially if it were accepted (though this seems currently unlikely) as more respectable and representative.

Yet it must be questioned whether the current military leadership could really achieve the unity of support and the competence and dedication within their own governmental instruments to create a truly effective dictatorship or police state, even if that were a goal. An attempt by them to achieve this might bring most of the disadvantages of dictatorial governmental without producing a truly responsive government apparatus or population, and it could even lead to chaotic counteractions.

- The highly authoritarian approach has been tried, after all, before in Vietnam; the Vietnamese had a dictatorship, under Diem, and it failed. Moreover, it failed -- to contain the VC, or even to survive -- despite some strong advantages over the sort of military dictatorship that would be available now. The chief executive was widely respected as a Vietnamese nationalist, as an honest man, and as having qualities of personality, background and spirit widely esteemed in Vietnam. Moreover, the Diem government, as a civilian nationalistic government, was able to get many competent and respected people to work for it. (Indeed, the example of Diem demonstrates that the factor of respected, patriotic leadership -- much as I am stressing it here -- is not enough to assure success). None of this has been the case since 1963, it is not true now and it would probably not be true under a foreseeable military dictatorship.

Even within an authoritarian framework, problems of motivation and leadership would remain central. The weaknesses of the Vietnamese military, in 1967, as the focus of patriotic loyalty and dedicated service, from cadres and public, appears not to be fully appreciated in official US analyses. Indeed, in Vietnamese eyes, although Ky's Northern background and associates may be his greatest single political liability, it is closely rivaled by the fact that he is a military man.

In contrast, many Americans (like a small minority of Vietnamese, mostly military) are impressed with the advantages that a military regime offers to South Vietnam at this time; they see the Vietnamese military as a coherent body of dedicated administrators and patriotic leaders, more capable than any other group of bringing stability and progress. Few Vietnamese, I think, see just what these Americans see when they look at the Vietnamese military.

Some roots of public disesteem for the military in Vietnam go deep. The ancient Confucian social ranking of the soldier well below the peasant and the mandarin scholar/administrator may by now have been

reinforced by the experience of the last 14 years. The soldier has been the chief victim of the conflict, and the peasant and the scholar/administrator have been the chief beneficiaries. The soldier has been the chief victim of the conflict, and the peasant and the scholar/administrator have been the chief beneficiaries. The soldier has been the chief victim of the conflict, and the peasant and the scholar/administrator have been the chief beneficiaries.

eroded by generations of power and administration exercised by "the man with the gun"; yet the highest cultural values of Vietnamese society continue to include Confucian virtues, of education, dignity, prudence, service, positive good works and respect for life, in which the military are felt to be most deficient. (In our own society, there is significant civilian prejudice against being governed by soldiers, except perhaps just after a successful war; but it is important to realize that the feeling is very much stronger in this culture than in our own).

However, more recent experience is reflected as well, compromising their claims as nationalist leaders:

a. Almost no military men are remembered in recent Vietnamese history as nationalist rebels or leaders or outstanding patriots. An exception is the group of generals led by Duong Van Minh who delivered the nation from the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem (though subsequent events are generating growing nostalgia for the old days). But the lack of senior ARVN officers who can claim any record of patriotic opposition to French rule -- as can such civilians as Suu and Huong, with many others -- is, given the nature of the present war and the nationalist challenge of the VC, noteworthy and even dramatic. Where there remain a sizeable number of senior ARVN captains, majors and lieutenant colonels who fought as non-Communist nationalists with the Viet Minh (most prior to 1950-51, when Communist domination of the Viet Minh became evident) -- some of whom commanded battalions against the French 15 years ago, when their current ARVN commanders were French sergeants or lieutenants -- not a single one of them has, to my knowledge, attained senior rank within ARVN (with the exception of the charismatic Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, murdered at the outset of the present regime.)

b. Most current military leaders, on the contrary, fought under the French against the nationalistic Viet Minh from the beginning, thus, in effect, fighting to preserve colonial rule. Though many of them thought of themselves as "anti-Communists" in this role, and many sincerely were, their image in the popular mind is more that of "collaborator".

c. In French military service, most Vietnamese were treated with disrespect by the French and held down (with some exceptions) to lowly "servant" roles, an unedifying spectacle to their compatriots: one that is remembered now that these same ex-servicemen and lieutenants have, by mutual promotion, rapidly become major generals.

d. As discussed earlier, the switch after 1955 to American patronage and support has perpetuated the "puppet" image of the Vietnamese Armed Forces.

What, however, of the organizational capabilities of the Vietnamese military establishment to run the government? Some of the claims by US proponents of the inherent institutional strengths of a military regime show a freshness of optimism more natural to November 1963, before the Vietnamese military had been tested at running the state than in 1967. In fact, these claims seem hardly to reflect at all the actual experience of the last three and one-half years since November 1963. The Vietnamese, however, have been watching the GVN during that period more closely than most Americans, perhaps more clearly and certainly more cynically; and what they have seen has not, in their minds, enhanced the prestige of the Vietnamese military as governors.

What they have not seen is administrative competence or discipline as great as under the last civilian regime (i.e., Diem). They have not seen coherent planning, nor disciplined, coordinated or bold implementation of policies. They have not seen greater honesty: on the contrary, it is universally believed that the scale and forms of corruption have multiplied under military rule, as compared to a more traditional, restrained pattern of corruption under Diem. They do not see dedication, in an officer class that seems preoccupied with corrupt income, with personal perquisites, with mutual promotion, and with alliances based on family, friendship and political advantage, rather than concerned with the lot of their troops, their society, or the struggle against the Communists.

In short, of the military virtues which an Army regime might have been hoped to bring to the process of government -- courage, dedication, resolution, honesty, discipline, nationalism, coherence, administrative ability -- none of these has shone brightly in the last three years of military rule. And these failings are seen as clearly, and perhaps felt much more painfully, by the Vietnamese troops and the bulk of lower and middle-level officers as by the rest of the Vietnamese society. To a large extent, the more dedicated military men ascribe downward trends in these areas which they deplore with great anguish, precisely to the increasing involvement of the military in politics.

There remains the two central claims that military regimes have traditionally made to legitimacy as the rightful governors of a nation:

their role as upholders of nationalism or liberators of the nation from an unpopular predecessor regime; and their role as military guardians of the security of the nation. Indeed, both of these claims were near their peak in November 1963. If the nationalistic claims of the military had always been suspect till then, thanks to service under the French, such doubts were washed away that month, at least for a while. The joy in the streets of the cities and towns of South Vietnam no doubt reflected mainly relief at the down fall of the Diem regime, but gratitude for their decisive role gave both popularity and legitimacy to the "temporary" military administration and particularly to its leader, Duong Van Minh. Minh's popularity persists, but this claim to legitimacy for a military regime vanished, not to return, with the Khanh coup of January 1964 (which a growing number of Vietnamese look back to with regret: and blame the US for "accepting").

The fate of the other claim to the allegiance of their country -- the military's role as central guardians of security -- has been even more painful over the years since the fall of 1963. During that period, the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam were defeated or, at any rate, faced imminent military defeat, lacking urgent external reinforcement.

They were defeated by other Vietnamese, by forces with certain advantages but greater disadvantages; numerically inferior but undeniably better led, disciplined and motivated. These are realities that Americans are reluctant to stress, because it seems unfriendly to an ally, and because this outcome implies inescapably the over-all failure of American support policy and the US military advisory effort. [In particular it indicted:

- a. US emphasis from 1955 to the present upon organizing, training, equipping and orienting ARVN for conventional combat; all of which became increasingly relevant, regrettably, after 1963, just because RVNAF had failed to counter the buildup of the VC guerrilla forces to Main Force strength;
- b. belated US support of Diem's proposals for a large-scale militia;
- c. US depreciation of the infiltration threat, and, until late 1964, of the actual scale of infiltration, resulting in inadequate force levels being set for support of RVNAF;
- d. failure to press effectively for the broadening of the social base of officer recruitment;

e. the countenancing and even coercive encouragement within MACV, up to the present day, of misleadingly favorable and optimistic reporting on RVNAF performance;

f. failure at high MACV levels to maintain the influence of subordinate advisors -- which consequently fell close to zero -- by supporting pressures at high levels within RVNAF; in particular, high-level failure to press effectively for the enforcement of command discipline and for the relief of exceptionally incompetent or unmotivated commanders.]

[All of this was matched, to be sure, by US failures on the civil side: the failure after 1956 to foresee adequately the Communist insurgent threat or the other growing forces toward instability; failure to press the development of adequate police intelligence or rural police in time, either under Diem or after the uprooting of Diem's police apparatus; the incoherence and often irrelevance of the AID program; above all, the massive failures of political influence upon the Diem regime and its successors, and the persistent neglect of measures to advance non-Communist political development within South Vietnam.]

But the bulk of the Vietnamese perceive these military failures sharply and poignantly. And they know a good deal about the roots of those failures, most of them persisting to this day: know the factors of military incompetence and irresolution at highest levels; the lack of understanding of the nature of the war and the Communist challenge; the inadequacies of leadership, command and discipline at all levels; the lack of urgency, the 40-hour (or less) work-week, the slowness to respond to intelligence or VC attack; the fatal lack of challenge to VC movement at night; the alienation of the RVNAF soldiers (themselves poorly led, poorly paid, their dependents poorly housed and supported) from the peasant population, reflected in RVNAF theft and abuse of the people, with the resulting penalties in a guerrilla war; the growing avoidance of contact with the VC, in favor of unobserved artillery fire and air; the costs, to morale, discipline and competence, of promotions and command assignments based on corruption, nepotism and friendship.

They have seen, since the spring of 1965, their defeated army turn increasingly from military concerns, and its place in the fighting taken by foreign troops. (In fact, it is the foreigners who have acquired some legitimacy as a political dominant force -- even in the eyes of the most ardent Vietnamese nationalists, however painful they find this situation -- by virtue of their military contribution; the Vietnamese military much less.) The prestige of the Vietnamese

military can and must be restored in the coming years by service to the nation; but it has not, for more than two years, popularly upheld their claims to be the rightful leaders of their nation.

Still, rightfully or not, the military have ruled for three years, and can be said to have acquired experience; and there is, finally, the claim that the military government under Ky has brought "stability." Assuredly stability, in some sense, is essential in the face of the Communist efforts. But, mere continuance in office of a handful of top leaders is not at the heart of what is needed. In a broad sense, what is wanted is:

- a. stability in office of administrators at all levels, long enough for them to acquire experience and competence (if, as in recent years, they do not start with it) and to win the confidence of subordinates and the population;
- b. the expectation of reasonable tenure in office, for oneself and one's superiors, so that administrators will be willing to take responsibility for decisions and to exercise initiative;
- c. freedom from the threat or actuality of non-Communist domestic revolt.

A regime that lacks popular support or even strong support of an organized minority has trouble delivering stability in these broad fundamental senses; and, in fact, the notion that the Ky government has provided these benefits is considerably illusory.

For the first four to five months, Ky's continuance in office was regarded as so unlikely, by Vietnamese officials as by everyone else, that his regime had all the paralyzing administrative weaknesses of a lame-duck administration. Meanwhile, during this period, Ky maintained his position largely by restraining from imposing his executive authority upon "lower" officials, from Corps commanders, Ministers and lesser military commanders down to District VII chiefs. The resulting decentralization was not conducive to success against the Communists. Then a few months of greater confidence, climaxed by the Honolulu visit, led to Ky's first real venture at executive assertiveness, the ouster of Thi: followed, of course, by months in which such governmental apparatus as remained under his control was preoccupied with suppressing urban/military revolt.

Fairly or not, Ky's survival during the Struggle is widely attributed by Vietnamese to US support (in particular, to the US planes that transported his troops to Danang). The same is believed of his original attainment to office (quite incorrectly, I believe) and his continuation before and after the Struggle: all of which contributes, along with the Honolulu and Guam meetings and Ky's own, private, assertions of US support, to the belief that he is even more than other generals a protege of the Americans.

The political calm of the last six months is attributed, in addition, to the existence of an elected, representative body (for which Ky does get credit, along with Tri Quang) and to the hopes raised of a constitutional process by which the military regime will be removed. As mentioned earlier, the calm might not survive the frustration of those hopes.

A notable feature of the Struggle confrontation in 1966 -- just as in the earlier "struggles" against the regimes of Diem and Khanh -- was the almost total absence of any organized popular support, or even sympathy, for the American-backed regime, in the face of an organized factional challenge. Far from fulfilling their promise of stability and concentration upon the war with the Communists, these authoritarian regimes, lacking any mass political base, have proven fragile and vulnerable to political opposition. Even when such opposition does not destroy them, it has totally preoccupied their energies and attentions for long and crucial periods, providing the opening for Communist advances.

The Army and "Stability"

There is, of course, one sense in which an Army regime is expected to excel in providing stability: stability against a takeover of constitutional government by the Army. Moreover, it is argued that it is essential that the Army, the most coherent and powerful non-Communist national institution, bend its efforts wholeheartedly to the support of the government, and that this can be assured only if high army officers participate directly in the government. Both these arguments are plausible. The question is whether the participation demanded must be at the very top.

American proponents of military involvement in the government generally maintain that they are speaking merely of "one of the top three or four positions", which would seem to allow the possibility that a military Minister of Defense might be enough. But under probing, it usually appears that those impressed by the need for "a military man to control the military" have in mind the Presidency as the only practical command post for this officer, if only because they cannot imagine any of the likely candidates lacking less.

The strength of these arguments is obvious; the question is whether they are overriding. Once again, certain observations might be made on the basis of the last few years' experience. The ability of army units to take power by armed coups, involving the physical movement of major units -- a major consideration in the abortive coups of 1960 and 1964, and the successful coup against Diem in 1963 -- has surely been compromised by the presence and strength of American forces in the vicinity of Saigon since late 1965.

Moreover, the increase in American military force and involvement should have increased the already great American influence over decisions of the Vietnamese military: so at least Vietnamese believe, and it is hard to imagine that they could be entirely wrong. Granted that the military leaders are emphatically not puppets; nevertheless, I believe it is a fact that not one successful or abortive military coup has been attempted in the last five years in which the leaders did not seek in advance for American approval (and believed, rightly or wrongly, that they had achieved it).

Can it be that this need for assurance has lessened with the increased American role of the last two years? All this bears on the likelihood that a military coup would displace an elected government in the face of American opposition. There is a further consideration that the target of such a coup would be for the first time since 1963 (or earlier if one discounts the legitimacy of the Diem regime) an elected constitutional government; if this would not deter the military directly, they might well reflect that it would give the American government far greater self-confidence in intervening vigorously to uphold the government.

As for the ability of a military man to "control the military" the experience of last year's Struggle Movement can be read two ways; the behavior of the ARVN First Division, and even the Second, is far from reassuring. The fact is that the soldiers and officers of ARVN divisions are themselves members of Vietnamese society, with families and with variegated Vietnamese attitudes and religious allegiances; and they are almost as responsive to persuasive critiques of the GVN by leaders outside the government as is anyone else. A government that invokes no real popular support from any segment of Vietnamese civil society can scarcely count upon the enthusiasm and unquestioning obedience from its military instruments.

Finally, the RVNAF performance over the last three years of its strictly military duties does not recommend the ability of a military regime to exact enthusiastic, dedicated or even adequate involvement of Vietnamese military forces in the internal war. The defects of recent military regimes as leaders of the nation have applied as well to their roles as leaders of the armed forces, with the added problem that

preoccupation with politics and administration have turned their attention away from military matters and left the armed forces to a large extent without a watchful, energetic high command.

In fact, it is questionable whether RVNAF can be reformed and brought effectively into the war -- as it must be if progress is to be made against the guerrillas, regardless of the scale of American force commitment -- so long as its leadership is involved in politics. That, at least, is the question raised by an increasing number of young officers and of senior subordinate commanders who have drawn the lessons from the depressing experience of recent years that "the Army must get out of politics" and that it must some way find a top leadership capable of the tasks of reform, of competent command, and of inspiring respect and dedication.

"The problem is the top leadership", says a battalion commander in the Delta; "I don't want to mention names, that is all I will say...there is no respect, no confidence". He moves to this comment from a discussion of the more lonely, critical problems of ARVN maltreatment of the civilian population, including chicken-stealing. An excuse, for his own failings as a commander? Yes, in part; he is not a very good one. But the same words come, late at night, from the neighboring battalion commander, who is a very good one, and who sees to it that his own soldiers do not steal chickens.

And they are repeated by a Brigadier General in the JGS: Failings at the top, he says, are reflected stage by stage down to the battalion. "Each level -- from squad leader to division commander -- sees that its superior officers are engaging in corrupt practices or political maneuvers and takes this for license to do the same and to ignore orders from higher authority". The top military leaders who are running the country, he says, are simply not able to capture the respect either of the people at large or of the army, nor can they give the military services the attention and supervision that are demanded. The general admits, even emphatically, the penalties suffered, in combatting an insurgency, by officer corruption and troop thefts and maltreatment. But he comments eloquently on what he sees as the cause. Malpractices by both troops and officers, he argues, reflect directly their feelings that the long war, of which they have grown very tired, simply cannot be won against the Communists by the type of national government and leadership now in place. In this mood of despair, in which their own professional efforts appear fruitless and irrelevant, they turn their attention to taking care of their own needs and their families', needs which are growing in this time of inflation and which the government does not adequately provide for.

The only solution he sees (and he is echoed in my notes by, among others, the Chief of Staff of an ARVN Corps) is for the military to return to their professional tasks (including discipline and the reform of troop behavior), leaving the government in the hands of civilians who can attract general support, including the respect and confidence of the troops themselves.

The Prospects Without US Intervention

Since this memo was first drafted, Ky has announced his candidacy. If no other military candidate claims support of the military/governmental apparatus or neutralizes Ky's use of the apparatus, Ky seems highly likely to win the election, especially if there is no run-off. His position gives him, in any case, strong advantages in publicity and campaign resources, but the early indications are that Ky is inclined to take no chances.

[According to an acquaintance in the JCS, Ky's machinery for insuring political support includes: the police, under Loan, who will be gathering information on political opposition and on the loyalties of district and province chiefs; a Government Inspectorate, under Mr. Vi and Mr. Tuy, which will use this information from the police plus additional information on which charges of corruption or malfeasance could be made against "disloyal" officials and commanders, to compel their support of Ky; and a Military Inspectorate under General La and Colonel Thang to do the same with unit commanders. The peasant vote is expected to be subservient to the guidance of the village chiefs, who in turn are under the influence of district chiefs; after the election, there will be a weeding out of district and province chiefs who failed to deliver the vote. Meanwhile, business interests are expected to fall into line, since their fortunes are so sensitive to informal administrative coercion, such as delays in the processing of import licenses, that they could not accept the risks of opposing and failing. All this machinery is to be applied as well to the elections for the National Assembly, in an attempt to assure domination by Ky].

It is not impossible that a successful Ky government would include an appropriate number of Southerners, of Central Buddhists, and of prominent civilians, or that Ky will manage radically to transform his popular image and acceptability, or that he will lead an effective reform of the CVN and the RVNAF. It is just highly unlikely.

Neither is it impossible that he will avert strong demonstrations against his regime, make progress in pacification, attract high level defection among VC cadre, and encourage the growth of mass political parties and vigorous non-governmental organizations. It is merely very difficult for a government headed by Ky to do any of these things, and unlikely that it will succeed. If Ky wins, the US will have no choice but to lend its best support to achieve all of these aims (see below).

But if that day comes, it will have meant that the best opportunity in the past four years for improving the odds on all these matters -- the elections of 1967 -- will not have been grasped.

It must be stated flatly that there are no panaceas, no guarantees of success: certainly I have none to suggest. Where I have asserted that current or foreseeable military-dominated government presents obstacles to dedicated Vietnamese participation in the war, I will not assert that replacing that government by any given set of Vietnamese leaders known to me will automatically or necessarily -- I would hesitate to say even "probably" -- solve these problems or win the war. I believe only that certain changes are necessary, not that they are sufficient; but after serious consideration of the counterarguments, I am more impressed with the risks and costs of continuing to avoid these changes than with the risks and costs of making them.

The past two years have seen the hopeful institution of a number of prerequisites for progress: the introduction of US combat forces to confront the North Vietnamese and Main Force units; effective measures against inflation; the development of the MARD/RD cadre apparatus and planning; the orientation of ARVN troops toward counter-guerrilla operations; a successful exercise in honest elections, raising hopes of constitutional processes, open politics, and more representative government, both at the village and national levels. Yet these steps, though necessary, have proven themselves insufficient to assure progress.

What has been missing is the crucial spark of motivation, -- among troops, officials, commanders, cadre, technicians and people at large -- to turn on the whole machine and set it moving. Leadership is needed, reform is needed, the trust and involvement of the public and of potential leadership cadre are needed.

There has been much mouthing of the need for "revolution" of one vague sort or another in confronting the revolutionary challenge of the Communists. In truth, revolution in any valid social or political sense has not even been aimed at, is not likely to come about from any of our efforts, and probably is not essential for success. But reform is essential. And where revolution, as last year's Roles and Missions study observed, comes up from the bottom, reform must start at the top. There is no substitute for individuals at the top levels of the GVN who can both exercise and attract leadership in pressing process of reform.

Ideally, the goal should be a GVN that, as Douglas Ramsey once put it, comes from, thinks like, and is responsive to the wishes of the majority of the population. Scarcely any of the current civilian candidates, any more than the military, fit this ideal perfectly at this time; they still represent the town more than the countryside, they come from an educated elite subject to considerable foreign influence. Nor do they offer experience in government or magnetic personalities. Nevertheless, a number of them do offer dignity, Vietnamese values, and patriotic example; and in this culture, virtue counts for more than charisma (in some contrast to, say, the Phillipines or the US).

"For a government to be respected, it must first be respectable," comments a leading Vietnamese journalist. He was not, in his view, describing the Ky government; but he did not find it hard to name Vietnamese, including Huong, Suu, Minh, who would meet this test. Likewise for other attributes important to public acceptance: nationalism, regional representation, civilian rule, administrative competence. On these points, alternatives that improve on the Ky government are simply not hard to find.

The aim of a number of these criteria is a Government that can present itself credibly as a nationalistic alternative to the NLF, one that can draw political support from the public and away from the NLF. In meeting these needs it is not only the nature of the Executive branch that is important. There is at least an equal need for a strong National Assembly: an institution independent in origin from either the military or the Americans, a forum for nationalists and a source of Vietnamese political pressure for civil/military reform and for competent, honest provincial officials.

Such a body could speak for the Vietnamese people to the Americans with some semblance of equality and dignity. As American troops, aid, and civilian presence flood into South Vietnam, such an institution is ever more urgently needed to preserve the most basic Vietnamese feelings of national integrity, identity, dignity. In the eyes of most Vietnamese, a military-dominated Government or Assembly cannot fill this need.

Besides the threat of short-run revolt and chaos, there is another way to lose this war: by allowing the expanding American presence to sensitize a growing part of the Vietnamese population to nationalistic feelings and to fear of the loss of Vietnamese integrity and sovereignty; and to allow, meanwhile, the Viet Cong to continue to offer themselves as the only potent organization capable of speaking and acting for Vietnamese nationalism.

Both a truly representative, nationalistic GVN leadership and Assembly are essential to avert this, as to gain the positive advantage discussed earlier. Neither, as things look at this point, is likely to emerge without the conscious exertion of influence by the US.

American Influence in Vietnamese Eyes

"The _____ coalition might, for one thing, be the last government for sometime not to be overtly anti-American. A spreading anti-Americanism is very much a part of the present scene in _____. American influence in the _____ Republic has been so vast that it has become possible to make a plausible case for attributing almost everything that goes wrong to the United States, and it has become part of every...act to blame the failure of _____ reunification on Washington's lack of sympathy for _____ aspirations".

The country in question above was "temporarily" partitioned -- with American acquiescence -- over 20 years ago, leaving a massive American presence in one half. The passage is by Richard Rovere in a recent article on the Federal Republic of Germany (The New Yorker, February 25, 1967, page 142). It goes almost without saying that the blanks above could be filled in by "Vietnam" without changing their validity. Almost, but not quite; for many Americans seem to be unaware of the extent to which the basic inference above -- that whatever happens, has occurred at the will and responsibility of one's powerful ally, the US -- is part of the logical machinery of Vietnamese minds, as it is alleged to be of Germans.

I believe it is an illusion to suppose that an American stance of "neutrality", "pacifism", or "non-intervention" can be even slightly credible to the mass of Vietnamese, with respect to any major social, political, economic or military process whatever within Vietnam. Most Vietnamese take as a major premise of political reasoning that the United States has the power to exert enormous and pervasive influence upon events and decisions in Vietnam. In this they are surely right. But as I have gradually become aware, many, perhaps most, of those Vietnamese who think much about politics take as a second premise that the United States is willing and able to exert that influence continuously and in detail, both subtly and brutally, and indeed that the US has no inhibitions whatever regarding either the scale, the circumstances, or the means of such intervention. In this they are simply wrong: so wrong that American decision makers -- with better knowledge of the anguish and internal controversy that accompanies many contemplated acts of influence, and of the frequency with which US impulses toward passivity in the affairs of other nations win out -- find it almost impossible to believe that intelligent and responsible foreigners could hold such a belief. Yet I am convinced that a great many do -- many who work closely with Americans no less than those who observe from a distance -- and that it is most unlikely that belief will be changed.

[One factor that makes this belief so resistant to counter-argument by Americans is that it is accompanied in Vietnamese minds by a long, explicit catalogue of alleged instances of American intervention, covert or open: many of these being valid cases -- of which the American public may be much less conscious -- and others being misunderstandings, which nevertheless serve to support the basic premise. The American role in post-war Vietnamese affairs did not begin, in Vietnamese eyes or in reality, with Eisenhower's letter to Diem in 1954; all Vietnamese are well aware of American support to the French in the "first Vietnamese war". It is taken for granted that the US made a crucial decision in favor of the coup plotters against Diem; and an American role is usually assumed, often with less validity, in connection with every other coup attempt. More recently, the loan of American transport planes to support Ky in the 1966 Struggle is frequently cited. The reasons for assuming especially strong US influence over the Vietnamese military have been discussed earlier.]

A good deal follows from this premise, in combination with others. For example, starting from the belief that the US can and will use its almost unlimited influence to achieve its aims in Vietnam -- including, to create the sort of GVN it prefers -- and the belief

that the present military administration is, in fact, highly subservient, lacks a popular base, and is a weak voice for Vietnamese nationalism, many Vietnamese deduce that a government of this weak character is exactly what the Americans want -- since otherwise they would change it -- and furthermore, that the Americans would throw their overpowering influence into blocking the emergence of any more independent, more "nationalist", regime. (Hence, the utter futility, and even danger, of trying hard to buck the -- supposedly US-preferred -- system, or to replace it).

Having arrived at this conclusion, they examine it for plausibility and find it perfectly "natural". "My friends find it quite understandable that the United States, with its great commitment of resources and prestige to the war in Vietnam, would want a government that will do what the US thinks is best, without offering any resistance or criticism." So speaks a Vietnamese who thinks of himself, and is, "pro-American", who sympathizes with and tries hard to understand American problems and motives. He goes on rather wistfully to hope that the US might some day come to see the advantages of a GVN, one still cooperative with the US, that appeared to the Vietnamese people as more representative, more respectable, and a more reliable voice for Vietnamese concerns and cultural biases; and he wonders, with growing pessimism, whether the US could tolerate, as a partner, a Vietnamese nationalist government somewhat more independent than the current GVN, more willing to criticize or take issue with the US.

All this is just a special case of a general Vietnamese axiom: "To find out what the US wants, just look at the way things are; if the US wanted them to be different, they would be different." This simple rule of inference can churn out an endless -- and appalling -- variety of deductions, e.g., that the US must either favor or be totally indifferent to such phenomena as corruption, weak command in ARVN, inflation, prostitution and social disorganization, refugee flows, sporadic political chaos, and even, sometimes, local successes by the VC. (For instance, a belief was allegedly widespread in I Corps recently that VC strength and boldness there reflected a deal with the US, to let them take Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces as a base for negotiations. The All-purpose Inference at work, I suspect: "How could these things be happening, save with the acquiescence of the US?")

In the specifically political context that concerns us here, the relevant consequences are at least three:

a. We are held responsible for the policies, real and imagined, of the Government we are believed to support, and there is almost nothing we can do to avert that; in particular, mere statements of "neutrality" will simply not be believed by almost anyone.

b. It is quite unseemly to let our actual policy be influenced in almost any situation by the vain hope that we can gain credit, or escape responsibility, by truly keeping "hands off": This does not mean, of course, that we should discard all inhibitions or prudence about intervening; simply that we should be clear, in making our choice whether, or how, to intervene, that we will be believed in any case to have intervened, unless it is supposed that we were indifferent or negligent).

c. Anyone desiring to oppose a GVN policy or the continuation in office of a specific Administration will believe himself to be confronting the power and will of the United States Government, unless he should receive positive and credible indications to the contrary by the US.

The first point above suggests that we have a great deal to gain, and the second that we have little to lose, by tactful, calculated and adroit acts of involvement in Vietnamese political affairs. The last point means that if, as I believe, the US should hope for strong civilian candidates to undertake the enormous costs and significant personal risks of rivalling the candidacy of Ky or Thieu, or, in other cases, of opposing GVN candidates for the National Assembly, it will almost surely be necessary for the US to undertake positive measures of encouragement to such individuals.

More generally: the question of the alternative forms, channels, and modalities of US influence upon the Vietnamese Government, upon other Vietnamese institutions and groups and, in general, upon events within Vietnam, is a matter that deserves conscious, high level, expert examination. It is simply essential that our influence within Vietnam become more effective; in both civil and military matters, and specifically in the political sphere.

I say that is not to prejudice the case in favor of one form or other of influence, nor is it an euphemistic way of saying that we must necessarily become "tougher", more overt in our pressures, or must "take over" the GVN covertly or overtly, let alone a call for a flat-footed, heavy-headed, bungling, ignorant and incompetent program of

interference and coercion. (The latter might seem to go without saying, except that every timetabla speaks of exerting more, and more effective, influence upon our Vietnamese allies, those who generally favor "nonintervention" point to some crude, abortive exercise by the US having just the qualities cited, as evidence of the risks and infeasibility of influencing Vietnamese.)

The insight and experience of experts -- for instance in USA and the Political Section -- with broad background in such matters should be focused upon laying out explicitly, for once, the alternative paths and instruments by which we could hope to make our purposes effective in Vietnam. Ironically, the problem is how to achieve something like the degree of influence that nearly all Vietnamese believe we already have.)

What Can the US Do?

It is clearly the gist of all the discussion above that the US should hope that neither Ky nor any other current member of the military Directorate wins the Presidency. What can the US do besides hope?

The list that follows contains, along with measures that seem worthy in any case (e.g., 1-4, 8-9) others that merely exemplify possibilities, the sort of thing that deserves consideration:

1. Unquestionably, we should bring the strongest private pressure to bear upon Ky and the Directorate to dissuade them from coercive manipulation of the elections. (The dismissal or curtailment of General Loan, though highly desirable -- see below -- would not in itself end this question). The "Inspectorate" machinery described earlier should be uncoupled from the electoral process, if possible.
2. The strongest persuasion and pressure should be exerted at all levels of the military hierarchy -- and the whole US military -- advisory effort could well be employed to this end -- to assure military acceptance of the constitutional regime resulting from an uncoerced election. (Likewise, civilian candidates should be conditioned to seek and allow an appropriate military voice and role in their government.)
3. We should encourage the leading civilian rivals to unite before the end of the campaign behind a single civilian candidate.
4. We should maintain informal, friendly and helpful contact with the leading civilian candidates and their "teams"; being prepared to furnish both money and advice to political parties.

5. Since if Ky runs while controlling the resources of the post of Prime Minister the odds greatly favor his winning, the strongest consideration, at highest levels in the US, should be given to influencing Ky to withdraw his candidacy. Given the stakes, it is surely not too late to consider this. (The ideal US channel would be General Westmoreland, perhaps via General Vien, who could then suggest to Ky and Thieu, in the interests of Army unity, that they announce their desire to return to the Army, to fight against the Communists and to protect the constitutional regime).

Thieu might well be induced (he has, apparently, already indicated as much) to participate in such a gambit. Though rational argument would be only a minor element, the case could be made that the dispute between Ky and Thieu has already threatened the unity of the army, and that the only solution at this point is for neither to run; Thieu might well welcome this approach, and it might turn out to have broad Army backing. Another (unlikely, and less desirable) form of this could be for Ky to resign as Prime Minister to run, with an interim Prime Minister to be chosen by agreement of the Directory and the Constituent Assembly.

Alternatively, second-best but still worth considering, Ky or (preferably) Thieu might be induced to run for Vice-President under a strong civilian (e.g. Huong), in lieu of either running for President; thus guaranteeing the Armed Forces access to and voice in the Administration.

6. As a weak, third-best option (after the two above), given Ky's insistence on running, we should consider favoring the competition of more than one military candidate, to attempt to moderate Ky's use of his powers as Prime Minister; avowedly, "giving the voters a choice", in support of the position announced by General Vien that "the Army is not a political party". Specifically, Thieu might be encouraged to run, either for the Presidency or (preferably) as a Vice Presidential candidate.

7. Perhaps there is some possibility of achieving a reversal, somehow (e.g. by the Directory, perhaps led by Thieu) of the recent decision barring a runoff election to insure a majority winner; this would be worth major effort if Ky runs.

8. Strong persuasion should be brought to bear upon the GVN to encourage greater freedom of the press, including less censorship of campaign statements, and the granting of newspaper licences to candidates (the US might consider making newsprint available, if necessary).

9. As part of pressures to insure open elections, instances of "tripping" might be leaked to the press for publicity (if private representation to the GVN did not work). The GVN should be encouraged to invite observers for the length of the campaign.

10. As a possible, somewhat risky, "wild card", Duong Van Minh might be encouraged to return, either to run, or preferably, to back a civilian, and/or to persuade other military candidates to withdraw, perhaps with the implied threat, "If one of you runs, I run".

I am well aware that a number of these proposals will seem radical; in particular, the last, the possibility of using Minh, and the notion that we might favor multiple military candidates, to split the military vote or reduce the ability of any one military candidate to monopolize the resources and support of the government apparatus. (Fears that the latter situation would destroy the "unity of the Army" reflect, I suspect, a view that the army has been and should be, in effect, a political party. Vion's recent assertion to the contrary, even if it were only a tactical ploy, suggests, in my opinion, a sounder policy for the US to support vigorously and a sounder basis as well for the crucial unity of the army as a professional body). Several of them, obviously, are alternative rather than complementary, the choice calling for serious staff examination and highest-level decision.

Let us turn now to some measures that do not prejudice the choice of presidential candidates; i.e., that are compatible with US acceptance of a victory of Ky or Thieu.

It would still be possible -- indeed, all the more important -- for the US to give strong support to the representation of nationalist and of regional/factional sentiments in the National Assembly. An adequately free election that resulted in strong representation by well-recognized and respected nationalists and religious/regional/political leaders would, in itself, reduce greatly the possibility of renewed public resistance to the regime, reduce the scope of such resistance if it should break out, and greatly support the self-confidence of the regime in suppressing it and of the US in supporting the regime.

Moreover, a free elective process would encourage the development of organized political parties oriented to acquiring mass support, an urgent necessity in confronting the Communist apparatus, both in the cities and villages. Finally, such an unconstrained elective process encourages the discovery of potential leaders with political capabilities and with regional and factional appeal.

Is this not just what is in prospect? Perhaps; but there is widespread and considerably justified skepticism about it. Certainly the elections of September 1966 set an encouraging precedent; but what is widely feared is that the RVN has any intention of allowing the coming elections to be as free of government intervention as in September, when stakes so much higher and with Ky's (or Thieu's) own role at issue.

Very specifically, there is widespread suspicion of the intentions of General Loan, who is expected to use the full resources of the police and MSS in whatever fashion necessary to assure a victory for Ky. This is not merely conjecture. Loan has already made such intentions clear within the police force (which has been set the task of determining the political interests of Province Chiefs and other provincial officials with an eye to replacing those not loyal to Ky); and he is known to have investigated alternative techniques for rigging elections.

Above all, it is very widely believed among Vietnamese that Loan was responsible for the political murder of Tran Van Van (the leader of the Southerners and principal oppositionist to Ky); and that Loan was responsible as well for the attempted assassination of Dr. Van and for the recent mailing of grenades to political figures. This is obviously a matter of highest sensitivity but, unfortunately, not one of great secrecy, except perhaps to Americans. Three different Vietnamese, two of them members of the Constituent Assembly, have each given me the same off-hand figure of 80 per cent for the proportion of Constituent Assembly members who do not believe that the VC murdered Tran Van Van, and nearly all of these are said to be convinced that Ky and Loan were behind the assassinations.

Whatever may be the validity of this belief, the belief itself is a political fact, one with strong political consequences, all the more so because it is held by the very class of politician to whose behavior it is most relevant. (If, in fact, the VC committed these acts with the intent of creating such suspicions of the CVN, they must be credited with having succeeded.) It means that those Vietnamese who aspire to office, and who might well be identified as significant political opponents to Ky, must feel themselves to be subject to coercion or even assassination by the current CVN. Moreover, it puts the US in the position of supporting a government that has engaged in political murder and may well do so again; although it is my impression the US is not believed to have instigated or approved these acts, the US is assumed to have known of them and accepted them after the event. This furthers the widespread assumption that the US has already decided to back Ky strongly for Head of State; but, even more, it implies that the US is ready to accept ruthless manipulation for Ky Loan to achieve that end and to prevent significant opposition from developing in the National Assembly. On all these counts, the willingness to enter open politics is sharply constrained of those very Vietnamese who could most strengthen the nationalistic image and reality of the National Assembly.

If the elections in the resulting National Assembly are to yield the greatest political benefits, individuals recognized within their regions or factions as authentic spokesmen for Vietnamese nationalism, and/or for regional and factional interests, must be encouraged to run and to compete vigorously. This requires at a minimum that the GVN refrain from a program of coercion and furthermore, that it positively act to reduce the expectation of coercion. This, in turn, demands the manifest restriction of the political activities of Loan, preferably his removal as Director of Police; and this would not come without the intervention of the US. //

While public and private statements and commitments by Americans on the US desire to see the new constitution upheld and to see free, uncoerced elections are highly desirable, such statements alone will not be enough to counter the prevailing beliefs that the US, in fact, supports Ky (or a military candidate if other than Ky) and condones unconstitutional pressures to assure his election. The removal of Loan would be a strong and perhaps indispensable signal to politicians and voters that the elections might, after all, be as free as in September 1966, that US public statements were to be believed. (Private pressures to curtail the activities of Ky's "Inspectorate" system might be even more necessary, by this point, to reduce actual coercion.)

The US could further reduce the impression that it is unequivocally backing a military candidate, and that political oppositionists to the military are privately regarded as opponents by the US, by greatly increasing contact and discussion with Vietnamese political figures. (The alternative of appearing aloof and restricting contacts does not reassure anyone of US neutrality, but, on the contrary, confirms suspicions that US support and encouragement is limited to those with whom they do have frequent contact; i.e., government officials and political "pets".)

I am not in a position to judge the adequacy of current mission contacts among potential Vietnamese political leaders, but a number of Vietnamese -- one being Dr. Dan -- have asserted to me the existence of a large number of "nationalistic patriots" -- well-known in Vietnamese society, though not as politicians and not to coercion -- who have stayed aloof from past governments and politics, awaiting the day when the chances seemed right for the creation of a nationalistic alternative to the NLF.

[If the existence of such a group is doubted, it is worth noting that the elections for the Constituent Assembly last September did reveal a significant number of dedicated, industrious, energetic and intelligent Vietnamese self-selected as politicians, most of whom were previously unknown to Americans. Granted that many of these people are young, inexperienced and relatively unknown even in Vietnamese society outside their local areas, their emergence still lends credibility to the claim that still other Vietnamese civilians exist -- more mature and experienced and with much wider reputations among Vietnamese -- whose names are missing from Embassy files and whose political potential may not be fully appreciated by Americans. Many of them may well have avoided contact with Americans in the past -- as nationalists they may not be specifically "anti", but are distinctly not "pro-American" -- and they have felt no calling to enter any recent governments, which they have regarded, rightly or wrongly, as dominated by the US].

It is in the longer-run interests of the US, as of Vietnam, that a genuine "political class" should emerge into open politics, capable of articulating and representing the grievances and aspirations of those segments of the population that together make up the majority. Such politicians will contribute to the integration of these elements of Vietnamese society on the basis of participation in government. This need is too urgent to be postponed to the "next" election, and it is not likely to be met in the coming election without active US encouragement: including money and contact.

If the above pressures are successful, and in particular if a truly representative, nationalistic National Assembly emerges, many of the political objectives of the US may have been won, even if Ky or Thieu have managed to win the presidency thanks to the government resources available to their campaigns. Even so, I believe the latter result would be highly regrettable. It would still be widely believed (even if untrue) that this outcome resulted from manipulation and US support, undermining the legitimacy of their authority; neither of them, in any case, fulfills the need for respected, trusted, representative or nationalistic leadership, and both raise the threat of open revolt. The stakes, in short, still seem high enough for the US to contemplate using its strongest methods of persuasion to discourage either Ky or Thieu, or any formally designated "military candidate" from running, (a), or to back some of the measures suggested earlier to reduce their chance of winning.)

This proposal will seem obnoxious, of course, to those Americans who wish to see a military candidate win, and it will appear visionary and reckless to those who are impressed with the power of the Vietnamese

military within Vietnamese society and with the corresponding impotence of the US. (The latter attitude implies that the estimate by nearly everyone else in the world -- allies, communists, the US public, the Vietnamese and the ARVN generals themselves -- of the ability of the US government to influence behavior of RVNAF leaders is entirely wrong. If it is true that the combined resources and personal influence of CIA, MACV, State, AID, and the White House cannot move the hearts and minds -- or meet the price -- of key Vietnamese generals, in the interest of averting a coup against constitutional government or of removing the armed forces from national politics, that is a secret known only to members of the US Mission Council).

The prestige in the hearts of his countrymen of nearly every nationalistic leader in South Vietnam, from Diem to Suu, has been based upon patriotic acts of renunciation and sacrifice. The way is open for Ky and his military colleagues to earn their own place in the roll of Vietnamese nationalists by a similar act. I believe it is in the interests of the US and of Vietnam to point out to them that opening persuasively.

Postscript: If the odds don't improve...

And if, finally, Ky runs and wins? Or Thieu? Then the US, along with the GVN, must simply face up to the renewed challenge of turning what were described earlier as improbabilities, under Ky, into realities, "despite" Ky: the broadening of regional, and civilian representation in the government, in the provinces and districts as well as in Saigon; the effective functioning of a strong, representative, nationalistic National Assembly; the improvement of Ky's image and acceptability; the reform of the GVN and RVNAF, with respect to leadership, competence, honesty, motivation and attitude of service to the proper; the conciliation and control of non-Communist dissidents; expansion of government access and support in the countryside; inducement to cadre defection from the NLF and destruction of the Communist Party apparatus; the encouragement of mass, open political parties and non-governmental organizations to compete with the Communist apparatus.

The burden of providing a nationalistic symbol and patriotic appeal, of attracting and motivating leadership, of pressing for reforms, and of giving voice to regional and factional sentiments, will then fall all the more urgently upon the National Assembly. And US guidance and adroit "intervention" will be all the more needed, whether welcomed or not, if US aims are to be met in unpromising circumstances.